

The Plot Against Character: Towards a Character-Centred Model of Screenwriting

**By Anthony Mullins
(Bachelor of Arts, Media Studies and Media Production,
Griffith University)**

**A feature film screenplay and exegesis submitted for the
requirements for the award, Master of Arts (Research).**

**Faculty of Creative Industries
Queensland University of Technology
2004**

Keywords

Screenwriting theory, character, turning points, acts, plot, arc, structure.

Abstract

Summary of exegesis

A review and critique of some of the most popular screenwriting concepts as well as a proposal for a screenplay model that seeks to conceptually synthesise character with structure.

Summary of Screenplay

When Andrew's infamous punk band is forced to earn extra money playing part-time as a children's act they unexpectedly discover a potentially lucrative market for their music. Unfortunately, playing to screaming three year olds is not the rock and roll lifestyle Andrew was hoping for as he approaches his thirtieth birthday. Tensions within the band grow and the old friends are forced to decide not only the future of their music, but also rest of their lives.

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Statement of Original Authorship

The written work contained in this thesis (creative work and exegesis) has not been previously submitted for a degree or diploma at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signed:.....

Date:.....

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the academic and general staff of the Creative Industries Faculty at the Queensland University of Technology. Special Thanks are due to Gerard Lee, Stuart Glover, Kris Kneen, Shane Armstrong, James Cowen, Mark Enders, Ross Hope, Shane Krause, Steven Lang, Grant Marshall, Els Van Poppel, Michelle Warner, Charlie Strachan, Mark Chapman Veny Armanno, Owen Johnston.

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Introduction

The last twenty-five years have seen a dramatic rise in the number of books on screenwriting theory available to the budding, as well as the established, writer. Despite the regular publication of scenario manuals since at least the 1910s, the release of Syd Field's *Screenplay—the Foundations of Screenwriting* in 1979 heralded an unprecedented interest in books seeking to explain the inner workings of the screenplay. A simple search of the category 'screenwriting' on the website *Amazon.com* uncovers 565 books about the screenwriting process and/or paperback versions of produced screenplays. Naturally there has been a corresponding expansion of the terminologies employed to describe the various conventions of screenwriting. Not all of these terms are new or exclusive to screenwriting but all aim to demystify and facilitate the process of writing a screenplay.

The most widely promoted terminologies in the last twenty-five years largely focus on a description of screenplay 'structure' at the expense of 'character'. Terms like 'turning point', 'inciting incident', 'acts', 'midpoint', 'climax' and 'resolution', while proving immensely useful in describing the structural shape of the screenplay's events, fail to adequately and transparently describe how the protagonist relates to these events.

This is not to say that popular screenwriting theorists do not recognise the importance of synthesizing character and structure in a screenplay. All of the most popular theorists have described how a coherent screenplay intimately designs character into the structure so that the two concepts become one. However, while it seems popular screenwriting theory has developed a range of terminologies to describe 'structure', far fewer terms have been developed to describe 'character' and, almost none, to adequately describe how the two are connected.

Ironically, this has happened in a way that has alienated a wide range of writers while concurrently empowering associated non-writers such as studio executives, government funding agencies, critics, producers, and directors by arming them with a list of technical prerequisites for a successful screen story. With such a wide variety of terms available to analyse structure, writers who approach their work from the starting point of 'character' are often impeded within the resulting process. Even

writers who engage structural processes may feel frustrated with choices that sacrifice an original character design for a formulaic structural demand.

In the few instances where a more character-centred approach has been developed, such as Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey* (based on the writing of Joseph Campbell), the terminologies employed verge on the esoteric. Terms like 'Approach the Innermost Cave', 'Seize the Sword' or 'The Ordeal' are of limited use to writers who have not thoroughly read and memorised Vogler's book. This example highlights a second problem with current screenwriting terminologies: a tendency towards the highly technical or abstract that can create confusion rather than clarity. For example, during a recent screenwriting process, in which I participated, the question was raised 'what's the first act turning point?' The ten members of the group gave ten different answers to this simple question. There were numerous and varying understandings of what a 'first act turning point' actually is, and this is not counting those who denied that such a thing even existed. In this instance, one of the most popular concepts of present day screenwriting theory was rendered analytically useless.

A Character-Centred Approach to Screenwriting

With these issues in mind, is it possible to define a screenwriting model that uses transparent and easily understood terminologies that synthesise character with structure? Furthermore, is it possible to do this in a way that acknowledges and incorporates the widely adopted structural approaches to screenwriting developed over the last twenty-five years?

I will be arguing that this may be achieved by adopting a more character-centred approach to screenwriting. To demonstrate this I will be proposing a character-centred model that has the potential to combine concepts of character with concepts of structure in a few easily understood common language terms that are consistent and complimentary to the most popular structural terms developed by screenwriting theorists.

The defining feature of the 'character-centred' model is its conceptual focus on the central character's evolving relationship to the other narrative elements over the course of the story. In other words all principles and explanatory terms are centred on what the central character is *experiencing* in relation to the other story elements such as family, friends, enemies, events, social and the natural environment, and how this

defines the story. I will be arguing that this conceptual focus on the central character's experiences presents the opportunity to establish a terminology, based on common language concepts, that has the potential to be widely comprehensible to both writers and associated practitioners. Additionally, due to the use of a small set of common language concepts, the 'character-centred' model can also be easily represented graphically, for improved accessibility.

The character-centred model uses four key terms to define the narrative focus of each part, or 'act', of the structure. These are:

- *Character*
- *Challenges*
- *Crisis*
- *Change*

In essence, the character-centred model argues that mainstream screenplays are structured around a story where a 'Character' experiences a conflict that presents them with a series of 'Challenges' that lead to a 'Crisis' which has the potential to 'Change' their life in some way. It also uses four key terms to closely relate the character to this structure. These are:

- *Internal Characteristics*
- *External Circumstances*
- *Conflict*
- *Commitment*

The main character is defined using the variables of 'Internal Characteristics' (values, beliefs, fears, desires, memories, etc) and 'External Circumstances' (family, friends, career, social and natural environment, etc). 'Conflict' is defined as the growing tension between these two variables. Each act of the structure is divided by a 'Commitment' made by the main character to a particular goal they hope will resolve the conflict. The aim of the character-centred model is to define these principal concepts in a way that integrates character with story so that an analysis of one is an analysis of the other.

Methodology

In an attempt to define such a model I wish to spell out its component parts. Initially, however, I will review the principal concepts from four of the bestselling screenwriting books of recent times: Syd Field's *Screenplay—the Foundations of Screenwriting*; Linda Seger's *How to Make a Good Script Great*; Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey*; and Robert McKee's *Story*. The concepts I will be investigating in relation to the four texts are 'acts', 'turning points' and 'midpoints'

Drawing from these concepts, I will propose a 'character-centred' model that synthesises character and structure using transparent terminologies. It will be demonstrated by the model's application in the analysis of a number of the recent critically and commercially successful screenplays: *The Truman Show*, *The Others*, *Adaptation*, and *Insomnia*. All of these films have received a significant level of critical acclaim with two of them being nominated for American Academy Awards in writing. They cover a range of genres and target markets and had a range of commercial success: *The Truman Show* had significant box office appeal, *The Others* and *Adaptation* performed solidly, while *Insomnia* had disappointing returns despite positive critical reviews. I have chosen films produced with principally American finance because, apart from the North American market continuing to produce and distribute the largest volume of films worldwide, the screenwriting manuals I will be reviewing are all written by American authors with a focus on Hollywood filmmaking. Similarly, I have chosen films that generally conform to the expectations of mainstream Hollywood filmmaking as promoted in the reviewed literature. In addition to examining these films I will examine my own screenplay, *The Curlies*, as an example of an attempt to put the character-centred model into practice.

Literature Review

Four of the bestselling commentators on screenwriting theory have been Syd Field, Linda Seger, Christopher Vogler and Robert McKee. Each has developed a range of theories, terminologies and processes to describe their ideas. There have been many others writers with varying theories and terminologies including a number of software and web-based applications. One in particular, 'Dramatica', uses 148 key concepts relating to story structure and character that claim to assist in the writing process (Phillips and Huntley 2001: 278—330).

Unsurprisingly, a review of the respective approaches (see Table 1) uncovers many similarities, particularly relating to the elements of the three-act structure. As Seger explains:

All it is, is semantics. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if I looked at John Truby's 22 points (a popular American screenwriting lecturer) and I found that a lot of what he's doing is what I do—but I'm calling it something totally different. Teaching is finding a vocabulary to explain a concept, to explain something that works (Coleman: para 22)

Comparative Table 1

Fields		Seger	Vogler	McKee
Act One	Set-up	Set-up	The Ordinary World	Inciting Incident
		Catalyst	The Call to Adventure	
		Act One	Refusal of the Call	Progressive Complications
			Meeting with the Mentor	
		Plot Point # 1	1 st Turning Point	Major Reversal
Act Two	Confrontation	-	Development of Act Two	Progressive Complications
		Pinch # 1		Approach the Innermost Cave
		Mid-Point	The Mid-Point Scene	Mid-Act Climax (Major Reversal)
		Pinch # 2	-	Rewards
		Plot Point # 2	2 nd Turning Point	Major Reversal
Act Three	Resolution	-	-	Crisis
			Climax	Climax (Major Reversal)
			Resolution	Return with the Elixir
				Resolution

However, despite their obvious popularity, many writers, including Academy Award nominees like Simon Beaufoy, screenwriter of *The Full Monty*, have found many of these new concepts less than helpful and often confusing;

I keep getting sent these screenwriting magazines from the States, and I find them absolutely blood-curdling: “How to start your script! Ten ways to end Act One!” They use a lot of jargon which I’ve never heard of, and it makes me think I know nothing about screenwriting (Owen: 282).

Charlie Kaufman, who famously lampoons both his own writing processes, as well as those of Robert McKee in the Academy Award nominated *Adaptation*, displays a high degree of ambivalence towards popular screenwriting concepts:

I don't have anything negative to say about McKee. I feel like it's not my background, it's not my way of working, but I don't want to dictate to anybody else how they should go about learning their craft. If people find it helpful then they find it helpful. What I do is what I do for me (Topel: para 11).

Perhaps part of the reason for this problem is because non-writers, such as producers, directors, studio executives, and film funding bodies, have vigorously adopted these terms as a means to influence, for better or worse, the script development process as Rupert Walters seems to suggest:

I do sometimes look at something and think, “We’re not really getting into the story fast enough here”, but the language of “inciting incidents” is difficult to understand. It’s difficult not to use it, because it’s the language of development meetings, but it’s much more important to understand what the story is and what the point of telling it is (Owen: 34).

Even some of the oft-quoted theorists are disturbed by what could be perceived as a misuse of their theories. For example, content from a number of lectures given in Rome by Robert McKee were used in writer’s contracts for the Italian network RAI until McKee himself forced their withdrawal:

They toss terminology at the writer—“what’s the controlling idea, what’s the spine?”—not in an effort to develop the screenplay, but in an effort to impress and intimidate the writer that they’ve got some kind of knowledge, which they don’t have (Robert McKee in Coleman: paras 45-46).

Apart from the general confusion surrounding, and misuse of, various terminologies, another important reason for these issues I would argue is that some of the most pervasive screenwriting terms are defined with an emphasis on plot rather than a synthesis of character with plot. For example, the term ‘Turning Point’ is often

described as ‘an incident, episode or event that “hooks” into the action and spins it around into another direction’ (Field 1984: 30). From this example, while it is clear the term refers to something external to the protagonist, it is not clear how the protagonist relates to the ‘incident, episode or event’. Did they cause the ‘turning point’ to happen? In what way will it affect them? Does the protagonist experience the ‘turning point’ or is it something they are unaware of? When does it start? When does it stop?

This is not to say that screenwriting theorists have not also recognized the importance of synthesizing character with plot as McKee states:

We cannot ask which is more important, structure or character, because structure is character; character is structure. They’re the same thing, and therefore cannot be more important than the other (100).

As Dancyger and Rush argue, the intimate combination of plot with character is a key feature of mainstream Hollywood filmmaking with plots devised to simultaneously develop the action of the story as well as convey character development (21). All four theorists reviewed dedicate significant sections to the synthesis of character and plot. Unfortunately, there are very few widely-used terms that adequately describe this synthesis. With concise terminology being a very effective tool in describing complex ideas it seems this vital idea of synthesizing character with plot has the potential to be overlooked in script development processes.

To demonstrate the plot-focussed nature of many screenwriting terms I will examine three of, arguably, the most pervasive and widely used terms relating to screenplay theory. They are, using the most commonly used terms, ‘acts’, ‘turning points’ and the ‘midpoint’.

Acts

The idea that a screenplay is broken up into three large sections described as ‘acts’, using the theatre term, developed throughout the 1970s, with Act One and Three being half the length of Act Two. Despite Syd Field being widely credited as the originator of this idea it is clear, as Thompson points out, others were playing with this formula too. Constance Nash and Virginia Oakley released *The Screenwriters Handbook* in 1978, which divided a screenplay’s structure into three ‘acts’ with Act One being approximately thirty pages long, Act Two sixty pages and Act Three thirty

pages (22). Field describes acts as ‘blocks of dramatic action’ which are divided by ‘plot points’. Apart from proposing that there are three acts in each screenplay Field rather prescriptively insists that Act One is thirty pages long, Act Two sixty pages and Act Three thirty pages. He also argues that each act has a different dramatic context: Act One is about ‘set-up’, the establishment of character and dramatic action, Act Two is about ‘confrontation’, the development of the dramatic action, and Act Three is about ‘resolution’, the resolution of the dramatic action (1984: 25-38). He, along with many other writers, equates the three acts with Aristotle’s idea that a story has a beginning, middle and an end. But as Dancyger and Rush point out, this is a fairly vague foundation for describing story structure:

After all, was Aristotle completely serious when he said, ‘A middle is that which is itself after some other thing and after which there is something else (19).

Seger, drawing on Field, defines the act proportions a little more loosely and suggests a similar purpose for each act—‘set-up’, ‘development’ and ‘resolution’. Each act is separated by what Seger calls ‘turning points’. The specific purpose and separation of each act helps to ‘move and focus the story’ (Seger 1994: 19):

The acts for a feature film usually include a 10-15 page set-up of the story, about twenty pages of development in Act One, a long second act that might run forty five to sixty pages, and a fairly fast-paced third act of twenty to thirty-five page. Each act has a different focus. The movement out of one act into the next is accomplished by an action or an event called a turning point (Seger 1994: 20).

Vogler, while not suggesting proportions, breaks his twelve stages of the ‘Hero’s Journey’ into three acts and specifies a purpose for each act:

Movies are often built in three acts, which can be regarded as representing 1) the hero’s decision to act, 2) the action itself, and 3) the consequences of the action (18).

Joseph Campbell, on who Vogler based his model, called these three stages ‘Departure’, ‘Initiation’ and ‘Return’ (30). In the preface of the second edition of *The Writer’s Journey* Vogler further defines what he means by ‘act’:

Each act is like a symphony, with its own beginning, middle and end, and with its own climax (the highest point of tension) coming just before the ending of the act...each act sends the hero on a certain track with a specific aim or goal, and that the climaxes of each act change the hero's direction, assigning a new goal (xxi-xxii).

McKee describes an act as 'a series of sequences' that 'turns on a major reversal in a value-charged condition of the character's life' (41). He also proposes the proportions of the acts for a three-act structure:

The first act...typically consumes about 25 percent of the telling, the Act One climax occurring between twenty and thirty minutes into a 120 minute film...In the ideal last act we want to give the audience a sense of acceleration, a swiftly rising action to Climax...So last acts are generally brief, twenty minutes or less (219).

McKee, however, argues these proportions are only a 'foundation, not a formula' with many variations depending on everything from the number of protagonists to the worldview of the writer (218).

In summary, all of these writers acknowledge the need to organise the individual scenes of a screenplay into larger sections collectively referred to as 'acts'. Each act ends with a major development in the story and, for Field, Seger and Vogler, each has a particular focus. There is also a general consensus that Acts One and Three are approximately half the length of Act Two in a three-act screenplay.

As Kristen Thompson in *Storytelling in the New Hollywood* points out, the idea that screenplays are broken up into large sections—with numerous minor climaxes leading up to a major climax—has been around since the early days of cinema citing early scenario manuals that frequently refer to intervals of rising and falling action across a narrative of several parts (21).

This would seem to be consistent with the dominant idea that the acts of a screenplay are separated with some sort of climax or major development in the story. However, as we have seen, the idea that a screenplay is broken up into specifically three 'acts' is a recent development in screenwriting education, which despite its enormous popularity and influence, has not been without its critics. Truby in 'Why 3-Act will Kill Your Writing' suggests:

The so-called 3-act structure is the biggest, most destructive myth ever foisted on writers. I would like to call it obsolete. But that implies that it worked in the first place (para 6).

Independent producer Alex Epstein is more moderate. He sees the three-act structure as only applicable sometimes:

Maybe half of all truly great movies have three distinct acts, and in some of those, you have to stretch to figure out where exactly the act breaks are. Where are the act breaks in *Hard Day's Night*? *All that Jazz*? How about *Spartacus*? *Forrest Gump*? *Apollo 13*? *Annie Hall*? Or the superbly written *Wild Things*, which has about five or six major twists (2002).

Despite these, as well as many other, detractors, the idea that a screenplay is broken up into three ‘acts’ is the most pervasive concept to develop in screenwriting theory in the last thirty years. As indicated above, it is used by many writers as well as other associated film professionals to analyse the viability of screenplays, despite it being at odds with the previous sixty years of screenwriting theory as well as other narrative arts like TV and theatre which break stories into more than three acts.

Turning Points

The concepts of ‘turning points’ play a vital role in marking out the end of an act and the beginning of the next. Broadly speaking ‘turning points’ are understood to be a major development in the story that changes its direction at the end of an act. Syd Field calls them ‘plot points’ and defines them in the often-quoted terms of ‘an incident, episode or event that “hooks” into the action and spins it around into another direction’. He goes on to describe ‘direction’ as a ‘line of development’ (30). Field generally implies that a turning point is something external to the protagonist, rather than their emotions or behaviours, and is usually some sort of narrative ‘event’: ‘A plot point can be anything: a shot, a speech, a scene, a sequence, an action, anything that moves the story forward’ (30).

Seger has popularised the use of the term ‘turning point’ as opposed to ‘plot point’. This may be because, as Thompson argues, ‘turning point’ implies a major event whereas ‘plot point’ seems to mean a significant event that may or may not be a major change: ‘Indeed, Field confusingly claims that there are plot points within acts, citing ten in Act Two of *Chinatown*’ (23). Seger, like Field, generally defines the

function of a ‘turning point’ as being to turn the action around in a new direction at the end of an act: ‘The movement out of one act and into the next is usually accomplished by an action or an event called a turning point’ (20). While generally implying a turning point is a type of narrative event external to the protagonist, Seger does note that it can sometimes be ‘a moment of decision or commitment on the part of the main character’ (29).

Vogler refers to two significant ‘turning points’ in his model:

The First Threshold marks the turning point between Acts One and Two...The Road Back is a turning point, another threshold crossing which marks the passage from Act Two to Act Three’ (18, 161, 195).

Vogler, in the first edition of *The Hero’s Journey* describes ‘The First Threshold’ in these terms:

Now the hero stands at the very threshold of the world of adventure...Crossing the First Threshold is an act of the will in which the hero commits wholeheartedly to the adventure (127).

‘The Road Back’ is Vogler’s term for the turning point at the end of Act Two:

Once the lessons and Rewards of the great Ordeal have been celebrated and absorbed, heroes face a choice; whether to remain in the Special World or begin the journey home to the Ordinary World (193).

As suggested by these two examples, Vogler sees turning points as a moment of decision for the main character, whether imposed by an external force or, by what he refers to as, ‘internal events’.

Although McKee does not actually define the term ‘turning point’ he does use it to argue that every scene should (ideally) end in a ‘turning point’ in which ‘the values at stake swing from the positive to the negative or the negative to the positive, creating significant but *minor* changes in their lives’ (217). Additionally, the turning point at the end of an act, which is at the end of a ‘series of sequences’ (which is also presumably at the end of a scene) creates a ‘*major* reversal’ in the character’s life greater than any preceding sequence. This is the key structural feature that separates one act from the next (217). McKee also refers to ‘story events’ that ‘create meaningful change in the life situation of a character’ although it is not clear how this

is different to his use of ‘turning points’. He does, however, argue that story events must ‘happen to a character’—which may indicate that McKee also emphasises the external events around turning points rather than the character’s reaction to them.

As we can see, all four writers make significant use of a key structural feature at the end of each act that changes the direction of the narrative. The general implication, with the exception of Vogler, is that it is usually an ‘event’ of some sort, external to the protagonist. This feature has most widely been referred to as a ‘turning point’.

One of the key problems with the idea of a ‘turning point’ seems to be locating exactly where they take place in an unfolding narrative where one scene flows into the next—in an ongoing flow of cause and effect. My own experience, outlined above, of a screenwriting class that came up with numerous first act turning points for the same film, seems to be consistent with Epstein’s experience of the concept:

In *The Fugitive*, does the second act begin when Dr. Richard Kimble escapes the prison bus, or when he escapes the following manhunt? When does the last act begin? When he discovers the one-armed man? When he confronts Dr. Charles Nichols at the doctor convention? When Marshal Samuel Gerard begins to realize that Dr. Kimble is innocent (2002).

Part of the solution to this problem may be, as Thompson points out, to re-examine the way in which the terms ‘turning point’ and ‘acts’ are defined. As we have seen the common definition of a ‘turning point’ is centered on a directional change in the story’s ‘action’. Thompson, however, suggests that the most frequent reason for a change in the narrative’s direction is a shift in the protagonist’s goals (27) and that this shift should be the basis of an analysis of a film’s acts rather than the assumption that each film should have three acts. This argument would be consistent with the assertion by Vogler, and to a lesser degree Seger, that each act climaxes with a ‘moment of decision’ for the protagonist. It would also accommodate McKee’s argument that there can be more than three acts in a screenplay depending on the content and style of the piece. It would also throw a greater emphasis on an analysis of the protagonist’s *response* to the events around them, rather than solely on the events themselves.

The Midpoint

Another recurring idea that emerges in screenwriting manuals is the idea of a ‘midpoint’. This is broadly thought of as a major event in the middle of Act Two. There are numerous speculations on the exact nature and function of this event might be. In *The Screenwriter’s Handbook* (1984) Syd Field recalls a conversation with Paul Shrader (writer of *Taxi Driver*) where Shrader always felt like ‘something happens’ on page sixty. Field, also frustrated with the enormous length of the second act, revisited his paradigm and, after trying it on a number of classes, developed the ‘midpoint’. He defined it as an ‘incident, episode, event, line of dialogue, or decision’ that links the first half of Act Two with the second half. It is interesting to note that Field uses similar terms for his definition of ‘plot point’ but does not call it one—instead preferring to call it a *link* that makes the second act easier to write because of its reduced length (1984: 131—139).

Seger refers to the ‘midpoint scene’, which, like Field divides the first half of act two with the second half and provides the added function of:

creating a direction for the first half of Act Two, and giving a change in direction for the second half of the act, while still keeping the overall focus of Act Two which has been determined by the first turning point (35).

It is worth noting Seger’s reference to a ‘change in direction’ at the midpoint scene, although it is not made clear how the story changes direction while still maintaining the overall direction of the first turning point. Seger, despite using similar concepts, does not describe the midpoint scene as a turning point. Also, Seger while acknowledging the structural usefulness of the midpoint scene, argues that not all scripts have one, although she later concedes that:

if the writer begins by first creating a clear three-act structure, often a midpoint will naturally emerge. Then, in the rewriting process, the writer can further strengthen and focus the scene (36).

Vogler quite clearly spells out a crucial scene in the middle of the screenplay that has a major impact on the overall direction of the story. He refers to it as ‘The Ordeal’:

Now the hero stands in the deepest chamber of the Inmost Cave facing the greatest challenge and the most fearsome opponent yet. This is the real heart of the matter, what Joseph Campbell called The Ordeal. It is the mainspring of the heroic form and the key to its magical power (159).

Vogler defines ‘The Ordeal’ as ‘the central event of a story, or the main event of the second act’ and defines it as a ‘crisis’ to differentiate it from the ‘climax’ at the end of the third act. In the preface to the second edition of *The Writer’s Journey*, Vogler attempts to clarify the relationship between the turning points of each act and this midpoint ‘Crisis’ in the middle of Act Two. In essence, he makes it into another turning point: ‘each act sends the hero on a certain track with a specific aim or goal, and that the climaxes of each act change the hero’s direction, assigning a new goal’ (xxii).

Using a diamond, Vogler argues that each turn in the figure represents a major change in direction for the protagonist with the first turn at the end of Act One, the second in the middle of Act Two, the third at the end of Act Two and the final turn at the climax as the protagonist resolves all conflicts and the story ends. Strangely, Vogler sticks to the three-act model despite essentially demonstrating, by his own definition, a four-act model with each act having ‘its own climax (highest point of tension) coming just before the ending of the act’ (xxi). Vogler does, however, with the concept of the ‘delayed crisis’, present a variation which breaks into three acts. In the ‘delayed crisis’, the space between the turning points of the ‘Ordeal’ and ‘The Road Back’ are truncated. Both events happen very close to one another, effectively making them the same turning point into Act Three (162). This may take account of Seger’s assertion that not all screenplays have a ‘midpoint scene’. Neither Vogler nor Seger speculate why this may be so. It seems clear, however, that Vogler sees this midpoint crisis as another moment of choice, like turning points, that marks a change in the protagonist’s goal.

For McKee, like Seger, a midpoint crisis is optional. Instead, he emphasises the ‘major reversals’ that end each act and that three acts is the minimum requirement for a complete screenplay. Curiously, however, McKee briefly refers to a ‘Mid-Act Climax’ that, as Seger, Field and Vogler suggest, breaks Act Two into two halves creating an ‘Isben-like rhythm of four acts, accelerating the mid-film pace’ (220). Apart from the contradictory terminology implying a climax in the middle of an act

rather than at the end, this would seem to be consistent with Vogler's suggestion that the midpoint is in essence another turning point.

In summary, all four writers indicate the presence of a scene or sequence half-way through a screenplay that break the second act, as well as the overall story, into two. The function of this 'midpoint' is less well defined than 'acts' and 'turning points' but there is a strong implication that it influences the 'direction' of the story in a significant way.

Thompson, applying the idea that a 'turning point' is defined by a significant change in the character's goals, argues that the midpoint is actually just another turning point. The result of this analysis is that Act Two is actually two separate acts. Thompson goes further and argues that a great many films actually have *four* acts rather than three. Each act is around twenty to thirty minutes of screen time and is separated by a turning point that sees the protagonist change their goal, which moves the story in a new direction. Maybe this is just a strategy to maintain audience interest or a culturally determined tradition, but this pattern, Thompson argues, is consistent from the earliest cinema to the present day (27—37). As we have seen, from our discussion of the 'midpoint', this is not an entirely radical idea and is indeed supported by the observations of a range of three-act advocates. It would, in part, account for variations in the number of acts in a feature film. Longer films of approximately three hours may have between four and six acts, with films of around ninety minutes only having three acts with no fourth act or 'midpoint'.

Thompson further defines the presence of four acts in many screenplays by suggesting each act has a specific function that differentiates it from the other acts. Both Seger and Field have specified a 'dramatic context' for each act with Act One being 'set-up', Act Two being 'confrontation' (or 'development' in the case of Seger) and Act Three being 'resolution'. Thompson drawing on these, as well as other, commonly used terms outlines four acts, each with a different purpose—Act One is 'the set-up', Act Two 'the complicating action', Act Three 'the development' and Act Four 'the resolution'. Thompson's definitions for 'set-up' and 'resolution' are largely consistent with those of Field and Seger. For Thompson, 'set-up' establishes the character's situation and goals, and the 'resolution' services the outcome of their goals.

The principal difference in Thompson's model is the use of the second act of 'complicating action' and the third act called 'development'. Thompson defines 'the

'complicating action' as a counter set-up , which is motivated by the protagonist's radical change of direction at the end of Act One. In other words, it works in a similar way to the 'set-up'—in that it is largely concerned with orientating the protagonist to the new and unexpected situation they find themselves in (28). This is consistent with Vogler's concept of the 'Special World' of Act Two which sees the protagonist enter a new and unfamiliar situation they must learn to live in (Vogler : 19). Next Thompson defines the 'development', which sees the protagonist trying to overcome various obstacles and challenges but actually making very little headway towards achieving their goals (29). This also may align with Vogler's idea that through much of the second half of act two the protagonist is in 'crisis' with little idea of how to move forward (Vogler: 159-179).

Thompson also argues that the use of the middle two acts of 'complicating action' and 'development' depends on the length of the film. If a film is less than ninety minutes the function of the 'complicating action' and 'development' are combined to make one act. If a film is more than 120 minutes then, Thompson argues, either the 'complicating action' or more frequently the 'development' is simply doubled with a 'turning point' separating the additional act (1999: 37). The strength in this argument is that it allows for a greater degree of flexibility in the analysis of screenplays structures beyond the analysis of predominately 120 minutes films that traditional three-act models provide. It worth noting that, despite the focus on character in the definitions of the four acts, Thompson does not give these terms names that might transparently reflect this, preferring instead to use names that have been generally used to describe various parts of a narrative. For example, it is not transparently clear from the name 'development' what part of the character's progress through the story is being dealt with. Similarly the use of the term 'turning point', despite the clarification of its definition, leaves questions about its purpose and continues to emphasise plot rather than a synthesis with character. It also assumes a reasonable knowledge of existing screenwriting theory and terminology.

Summary

As we have seen, there are a number of recurring and popular concepts in screenwriting theory. Unfortunately, many of the most pervasive concepts emphasise plot over character in a way that is not always helpful to writers, or to associated film professionals. These concepts can generate flawed assumptions about the structure of

mainstream screenplays. Thompson's more plausible definition that a turning point is a significant shift in the protagonist's goal allows for a more accurate analysis of the structure and frequency of acts through a wide range of feature films. It also provides the opportunity to define a precise and unique function for each act. As a result Thompson's model is a useful starting point for conceiving a character-centered model of screenwriting that utilises transparent common use language.

Analysis: Character-Centred Model of Screenwriting

I now intend to propose a model of screenwriting that will attempt to address the range of issues outlined above by provided a more character-centred analysis of screenplay structure. Using Thompson's observations of mainstream screenplays as a starting point, the model is based around eight key terms that map out the main character's relationship to the narrative shape of a screenplay. Each term of the model is designed to maintain a focus on the main character of the story using transparent and widely understood concepts.

For each term I will, firstly, define its place and function in screenplay structure and how it specifically relates to the character's progress through the story. Secondly, I will demonstrate the term's relevance to a number of recent commercially and critically successful films from a range of genres: *The Truman Show* (1998), *The Others* (2001), *Adaptation* (2002), and *Insomnia* (2002).

The Truman Show tells the story of Truman Burbank, who comes to suspect that everyone is his life, including his family and friends, is involved in an elaborate conspiracy to prevent him ever leaving his home town of Sea Haven by exploiting his fear of water and the relative safety and comfort of home. The story concludes when Truman finally discovers his life is actually a twenty-four hour television show and, despite pleas from the show's producers to remain in a controlled world 'without fear', he chooses to leave the show and explore the world outside. *The Others* centres on the story of Grace, a strongly religious young woman, who is desperately waiting, with her two children, for her husband to return from the Second World War. When their servants inexplicably disappear one day from their large Victorian manor, strange noises and occurrences begin to haunt the house. The story concludes with Grace discovering that she has killed herself and her children in her desperation and that they are actually ghosts haunting the manor. *Adaptation* tells the story of Charlie, a successful but socially inept screenwriter, who is trying to write the follow up to his

latest success—an adaptation of a book he admires. Unfortunately, the distractions of his brother, who has also decided to become a screenwriter, and anxieties about his own disastrous social life, lead to a crippling case of writer's block. The story concludes with Charlie overcoming his fears of rejection and failure, completing the screenplay and telling the girl of his dreams how he feels about her. *Insomnia* centres on the story of Dormer, a veteran police detective who is sent to investigate a small town murder to avoid an internal affairs investigation into his procedures. When Dormer accidentally kills his partner, who was going to talk to internal affairs, he tries to cover up the crime. Unfortunately, the killer they were investigating knows this and frames Dormer. The story concludes with Dormer having to choose between his hard won professional reputation and the capture and conviction of the killer.

I will also use my original screenplay *The Curlies* (2003) as an example of an attempt to put the character-centred model into practice. *The Curlies* tells the story Andrew, a lovable but self-centred singer in a desperately uncommercial punk band, who is forced by his fellow band members to earn money as a children's act when one of them discovers they are having a baby. Despite some success with their unique punk approach to children's songs, this is not the rock and roll lifestyle Andrew was hoping for as he approaches his thirtieth birthday. Tensions within the band grow and the old friends are forced to decide not only the future of their music, but also rest of their lives. The story concludes with Andrew recognising his selfishness and accepting that his life has moved on. The first draft of *The Curlies* was completed one month before, and without knowledge of, the release of Australian film *The Wannabes* (2003), which tells the story of a group of criminals who form a children's band to rob a rich widow. Apart from the broad premise ('a group of misfits form a children band') the two scripts have no similarity.

Each of the films selected conforms to the narrative expectations of mainstream Hollywood filmmaking in that they feature a clear central protagonist who drives a story line that clearly relates external conflict to inner tension (Dancyger and Rush: 29). Additionally, drawing on Thompson's model, I will be arguing that each film features a four-act structure with a significant character change or 'arc' at the end of the story.

The Key Concepts

The character-centred model uses four key terms to define the narrative focus of each stage, or ‘act’, of the structure. These are:

- *Character*
- *Challenges*
- *Crisis*
- *Change*

In essence, the character-centred model argues that mainstream screenplays are structured around a story where a ‘Character’ experiences a conflict that presents them with a series of ‘Challenges’ that lead to a ‘Crisis’ which has the potential to ‘Change’ their life in some way. It also uses four key terms to closely relate the character to this structure. These are:

- *Internal Characteristics*
- *External Circumstances*
- *Conflict*
- *Commitment*

The main character is defined using the variables of ‘Internal Characteristics’ (values, beliefs, fears, desires, memories, etc) and ‘External Circumstances’ (family, friends, career, social and natural environment, etc). ‘Conflict’ is defined as the growing tension between these two variables. Each act of the structure is divided by a ‘Commitment’ made by the main character to a particular goal they hope will resolve the conflict. The aim of the character-centred model is to define these principal concepts in a way that integrates character with story so that an analysis of one is an analysis of the other.

‘Character’

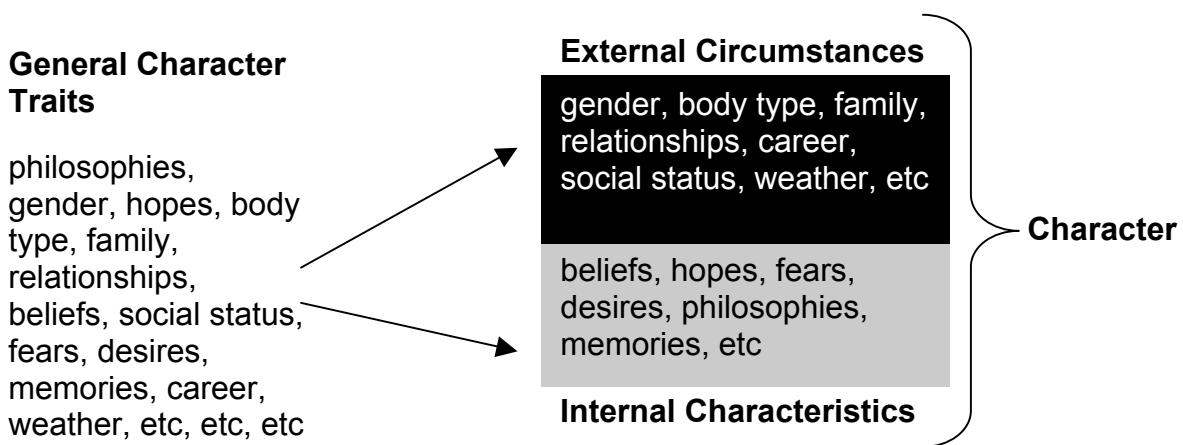
The first term in the character-centred model of screenwriting is ‘Character’ and provides the focus for the first act of a screenplay which can be summarised as: **A character’s life is disrupted by a developing conflict.**

Drawing on the common term ‘set-up’ the structural objective of the first act of a screenplay is to set-up who the protagonist, or main character, of the story is and what the problem is that emerges in their world.

Firstly, in defining the protagonist of the story, the character-centred model establishes two variables that will assist in shaping their background and various traits in order that they may be related to the structure of the story. These variables are their ‘internal characteristics’ and ‘external circumstances’. The two character variables essentially give an insight into the emotional and physical world the protagonist, and consequently the story, inhabits.

The ‘internal characteristics’ of the protagonist are broadly defined as the various elements of their emotional, intellectual and spiritual life. Beliefs, hopes, fears, desires, philosophies and memories are all a part of a protagonist’s ‘internal’ characteristics. For example, a protagonist who has a traumatic childhood memory of a dog attack may have a specific fear of all canines, regardless of actual danger a particular dog presents.

The ‘external circumstances’ of the protagonist are basically everything else. They are broadly defined as the various elements of their physical, interpersonal, social and natural environment. Gender, body-type, family relationships, sex, career, wealth, war, poverty, avalanches and meteors from space are all a part of a protagonist’s ‘external circumstances’. Even the protagonist’s behaviour (habits, physical talents, etc) is a part of this ‘external’ world because they are physical manifestations of their ‘internal’ life. A character that panics around dogs is behaving that way because of an internal emotional state. Their potentially irrational behaviour is an expression of this. Similarly, the interpersonal relationships the protagonist has with family, friends and colleagues are ‘external circumstances’. Even though they may have ‘internal’ emotions towards various people, the source of the emotion, the person themselves, is ‘external’ to the protagonist. These two variables are categories which organise the protagonist’s world (see Figure # 1 below).

Figure # 1

For example, Charlie in *Adaptation*, could be described as a shy, insecure, but highly intelligent (internal characteristics) screenwriter who, despite writing a hit screenplay, is socially invisible, cannot get a girlfriend and still lives with his outgoing and highly irritating brother (external circumstances). Similarly, Dormer in *Insomnia* could be described as a cynical, pragmatic, and determined (internal characteristics) police detective who, despite his distinguished career, has not always played by the rules in his investigations and is consequently under investigation by internal affairs (external circumstances). Andrew in *The Cuckoo's Nest* is a fun loving, irresponsible, but somewhat insecure (internal characteristics) singer in an irreverent punk band who, despite being almost thirty, still lives with his parents and works in a dead end job at a video parlour (external circumstances).

Obviously, each of these characters could be described in more detail depending on the individual processes of the writer. However, regardless of this, the character-centred model encourages the sorting of various traits and conditions into ‘internal characteristics’ and ‘external circumstances’ in an attempt to describe the emotional relationship the character has to their physical world. From this analysis the model is able to begin describing the relationships between the character and story. Within the character-based model, a key task of the first act of a screenplay, is to identify any existing conflicts that exist between the characters’ internal life and external life. In order to do this we must first define what the character-based model means by ‘conflict’

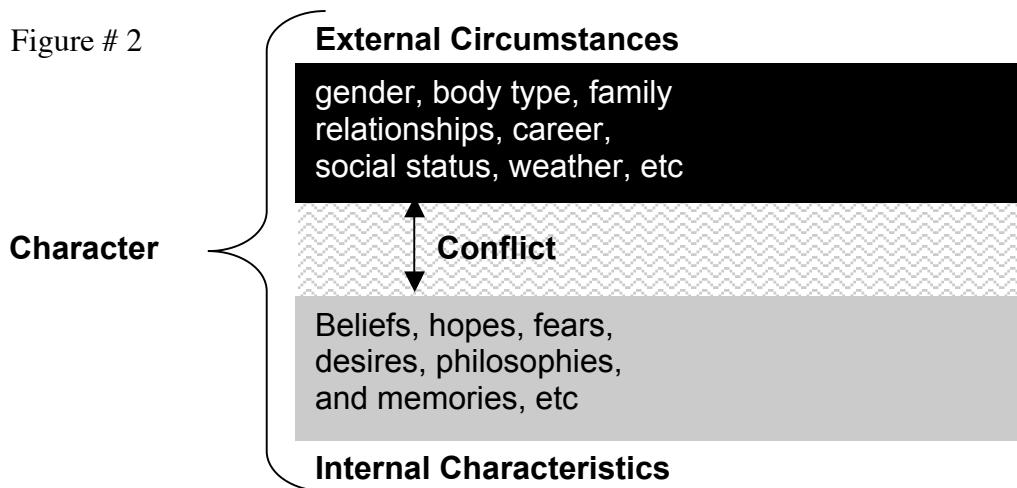
Conflict is often identified as being an essential ingredient of any dramatic story. Linda Seger argues that:

Conflict is the basis of drama. It's the stuff by which drama is made...In good drama, characters enter into a dynamic relationship that emphasizes difference (165).

In other words, the world around the character is in somewhat different to the way they desire it to be. It might be because of a war, or alternatively, the loss of a childhood toy. Both Seger and McKee categorise different types of conflict. Seger refers to 'inner', 'relational', 'societal', 'situational', and 'cosmic' conflict (165—174) while McKee similarly outlines inner', 'interpersonal' and 'extra-personal' conflict (213—216). Each moves outward from the character's emotional/philosophical conflicts and into the familial, social and natural world surrounding them. The character-centred model, however, treats conflict slightly differently.

The character-centred model defines 'conflict' as the tension between the 'external circumstances' and 'internal characteristics' of the main character. If the external circumstances of the character are different to how their internal values or desires then tension, or 'conflict', is created (see Figure # 2).

Figure # 2



In other words, 'conflict' is always defined as the character's internal life having a relationship to the external world, rather than being a separate area of conflict on its own. McKee and Seger both argue that there is a separate type of conflict called

'inner' conflict but I would argue that any sort of 'inner' conflict would inevitably have a relationship to an outside circumstance. For example, Truman in *The Truman Show* has always wanted to explore the world outside of his hometown of Sea Haven. In particular he would like to track down a childhood sweetheart who he thinks lives in Fiji. However, because of an accident at sea as a child, resulting in a fear of open water and guilt about his father's apparent death (internal characteristics), as well as discouragement from those he thinks are his friends and family but are really actors in a 24-hour a day television show (external circumstances), he has never pursued those dreams. Truman's 'internal' emotional world is in conflict with the 'external' interpersonal world around him.

Of course, it is hard to think of a person, either fictional or real, who doesn't have some sort of conflict in their life. Indeed, everyday life throws up regular conflicts that we struggle against to fulfil our ongoing need for food, shelter, love, sex, television and so on. With this in mind, when shaping the internal characteristics and external circumstances of a character, it is vital to establish which of these are already in conflict with each other. For example, Charlie in *Adaptation*, despite being a successful screenwriter, is deeply insecure and socially inept. Grace, in *The Others*, not only has to care for her light-sensitive children when her servants unexpectedly leave, she is also desperate for news of her husband who left for the war a number of years earlier.

Similarly, a character does not need to fully comprehend the extent or the nature of the conflicts in their life. For example, Grace is yet to fully comprehend the shocking reasons for the disappearance of the servants. Truman, in *The Truman Show*, is unaware that his life is actually part of a TV show. Indeed the entire story is structured around Truman discovering the full extent of the deception. Similarly, Andrew in *The Curries*, despite being in open conflict with Tim's girlfriend, and generally ignoring the wishes of his parents, does not recognise just how far he has grown apart from his friends. The story is structured around his recognition of this fact and his response to it.

The character-centred model defines recurring or established conflict in a character's life as 'Existing Conflict'. This existing conflict is an important component in developing a well-defined central character as it has the potential to create a dynamic relationship between the emotional life of the character and their external circumstances. Additionally, as suggested above in the examples from *The*

Others, The Truman Show and The Curries, existing conflict can help indicate where the story is going.

However, ‘existing conflict’ alone does not constitute a story. For example, *The Truman Show* would be less of a story if the focus remained on Truman’s ignorance of the TV show around him and his inability to pursue his dreams of travel and finding his love Sylvia. While it could be argued that Truman as a character, especially given his unique and bizarre circumstances, is extremely interesting, these circumstances alone do not constitute mainstream screen story. This is because the conflict is not ‘growing’. Nothing is happening. All we have is a portrait. An interesting character with possibly a few quirks. The conflict is constant and will, eventually, become monotonous (see Figure # 3).

Figure # 3

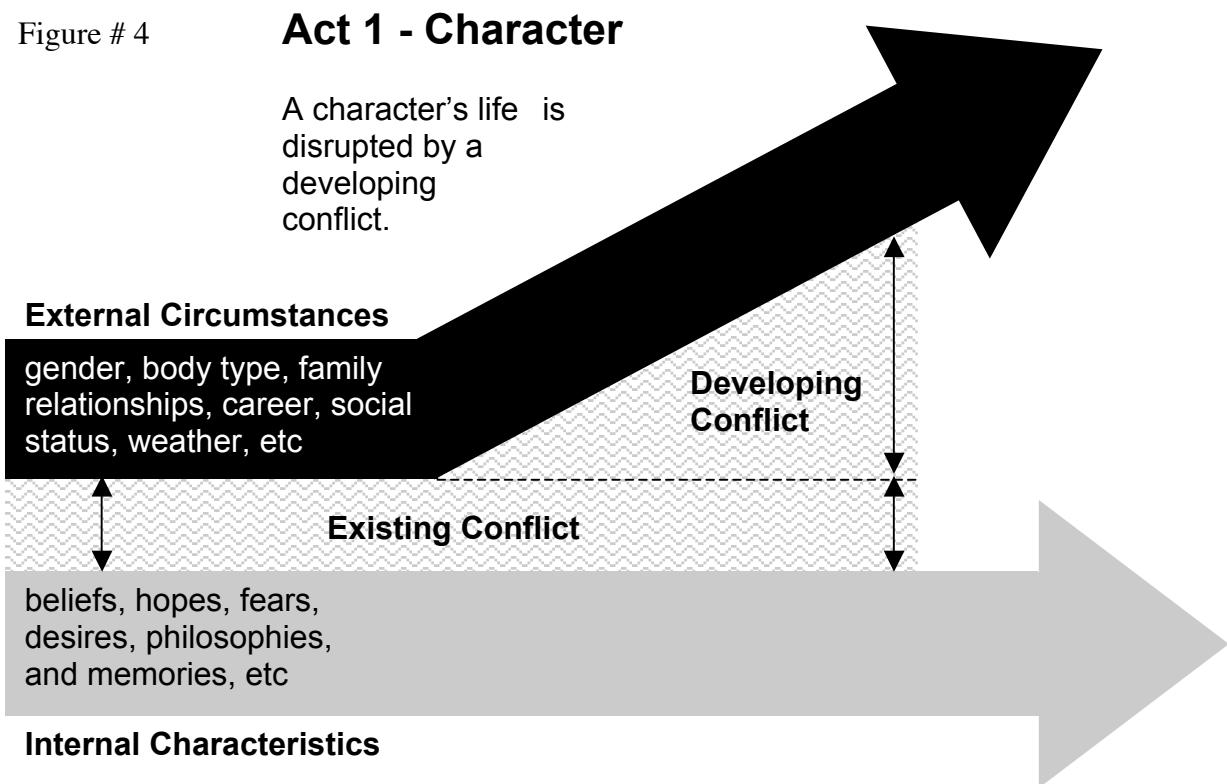


Mainstream screenplays rely on a particular sort of ‘conflict’ to make a story—what Robert McKee refers to as ‘progressive complications’:

To complicate means to make life difficult for characters. To complicate progressively means to generate more and more conflict as they face greater and greater forces of antagonism, creating a succession of events that passes points of no return (208).

What McKee is arguing is that progressive complications develop conflict in the circumstances of the character's life so that the story moves forward. Without this development, the character's life is static. In other words, 'something must happen'. Until there is a growing problem in the character's life everything is mostly normal. Mainstream screenplays rely on a growing conflict of some sort to move beyond a portrait of a character and into a story about a character. Here, in the character-based model, this sort of conflict is called 'Developing Conflict' (see Figure # 4).

Figure # 4



For example, in *The Others* the occurrence of strange ghostly events moves the story forward beyond a portrait of a lonely isolated mother and her strange light-sensitive children. In *Insomnia*, a developing conflict is created for Dormer when his partner Hap tells him he wants to do a deal with Internal Affairs that might implicate Dormer in tampering evidence. In *The Curries*, Laura's pregnancy forces Andrew's band to find a reasonable way to make a living, despite Andrew's protests. Andrew's situation is made worse when the solution is identified as forming a children's band.

Of course, conflict is a relative concept. Indeed if the character were Superman the conflict would need to be significant to create a problem in his life. If the problem were your average bank robber then it would just be just another day in the

phonebooth. If, however, it were Lex Luther planning to blow up the World with a bomb then this conflict might get Superman's heart beating a little faster—especially if Lois Lane was tied to the bomb...and Superman was planning to marry her on the weekend. So, if the screenplay is going to move beyond a static portrait and into a dynamic story then the developing conflict needs to have the potential to become a more urgent problem than any 'existing conflict'.

Additionally, in mainstream screenwriting the developing conflict invariably comes from the external world of the character rather than their internal life. For example, in *The Truman Show*, a series of strange events—including a falling lighting rig, a strange isolated rainstorm, the apparent reappearance of his father and a radio show that seems to transmit his every move—make Truman aware that something odd is going on around him. In *Adaptation*, despite Charlie's enthusiasm for attempting an adaptation of *The Orchid Thief*, he is constantly distracted by thoughts of food, his brother's decision to become a scriptwriter and his inability to tell Amelia how he feels about her.

The reason this developing conflict usually emerges from the character's external world is possibly because in stories, as in real life, the world around people shifts a lot more freely than their emotional world. We may cry one second, and laugh the next, but those responses are generally predictable and only change slowly over time. In contrast, the external world constantly shifts according to the individual needs and desires of billions of human beings. Add to that the variables of economics, politics, technology, religion, culture, nature, the weather, and the cosmic alignment of the planets and we have a distinct picture of a world in constant flux.

To summarise, the character-centred model of screenwriting argues that the first act of 'Character' should ideally establish the main character of the story as well as the 'Existing' and 'Developing' conflicts in their life. The narrative focus of the act can be summarised as : **A character's life is disrupted by a developing conflict.** The main character is defined by their 'Internal Characteristics' (beliefs, values, etc) and their 'External Circumstances' (family, friends, career, environment, etc). The conflict is defined by the tension between the 'internal' desires and 'external' reality of the character.

As can be seen, the intimate linking of conflict to the character's 'internal characteristics' and 'external circumstances' is a key feature of the character-based model as it essentially defines conflict in relation to the main character. The evolving

shape of the conflict will at once describe the dramatic progress of the story as well as how that conflict relates to the character.

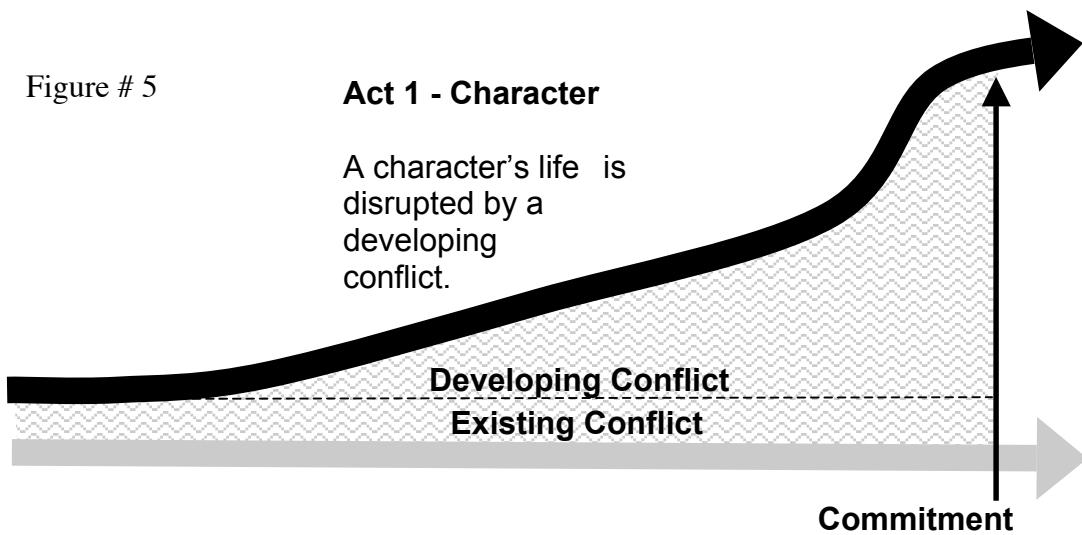
'Commitment'

At this point it would be worthwhile defining the term 'Commitment' as this is the feature of the model that will provide the transition between each act of the screenplay. Drawing on Thompson's definition of a 'turning point' as a significant shift in the protagonist's goals, the character-centred model defines the transition between acts as a 'Commitment'. It can be summarised in this way: **The character commits to a goal to overcome the conflict when the conflict develops significantly.**

For example, in *Insomnia* Dormer commits to trying to cover up his accidental killing of Hap, who was threatening to talk to internal affairs, when he lies about a second shot being fired by the suspect they were chasing. This commitment is confirmed in the next scene when he hides the suspect's gun under the floorboards in his hotel room. In *The Truman Show*, Truman, after discovering an elevator that looks like the inside of a film set, tells Marlon, his best friend, that he is going to Fiji. In *The Others*, Grace becomes convinced that there are intruders in the house when she hears the voices in the junk room and, consequently, plans a thorough search of the entire house. In *The Curlies*, Andrew is presented with a choice—either agree to forming a children's band or disband their punk band. He reluctantly agrees.

In all examples, the character is making a clear commitment to solving the problem in a specific way. It should also be noted that this commitment is invariably motivated by a significant shift in the character's external circumstances which has the effect of increasing the conflict they are experiencing (see Figure # 5).

Figure # 5



The goal they set will, they hope, overcome the conflict. Like Thompson, I would argue that it is this character *response* to the developing action that signifies the end of an act, rather than the action itself as is implied by common definitions of ‘turning points’ by Field and Seger, as it gives a clear indication of where the next act is heading. With this commitment a question is established for the audience—will the character achieve their goal? The stage is set for the next act of the story.

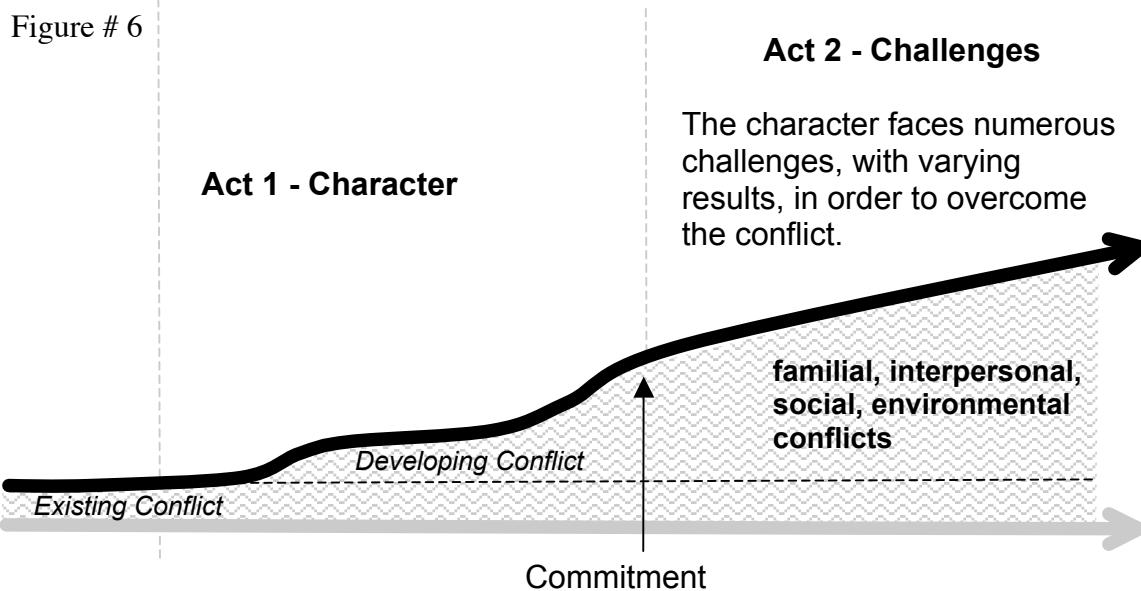
‘Challenges’

The second act of the character-centred model is called ‘Challenges’ and is focussed on the attempts of the character to gain control over the developing conflict in their life. It can be summarised in this way: **The character faces numerous challenges, with varying results, in order to overcome the developing conflict.**

As we have seen above, characters will usually have some level of manageable conflict in their life at the beginning of a story. A new conflict develops, however, when their external world changes in some way—putting more stress on their internal life. This creates various challenges for the character to try to overcome. Truman, in *The Truman Show*, tries unsuccessfully to book a flight, catch a bus and drive out of Sea Haven. Dormer, in *Insomnia*, must lie to his fellow officers, tamper with evidence and track down the killer on his own to get out of the mess he is in. In *The Others*, Grace must search the house, investigate the strange photos she has found and find out the history of the house from Mrs Mills. What the character is struggling to

do is reduce the level of tension between their internal and external lives to a manageable level. Understandably, the character will often draw on ‘tried and true’ methods of fixing things in their life to do this. They may call on old abilities, strategies, habits, friends, relationships, etc. Why not? They’ve worked before. They may even learn a few new skills and make new acquaintances to help fix the problem. Dormer, in *Insomnia*, tries tampering with evidence and ignoring police procedure as he has done before. Charlie, in *Adaptation*, sticks to his principles of artistic and personal integrity. Andrew, in *The Curlies*, continues to undermine the needs of everyone else by sabotaging the children’s band concept so that he can reform his old punk band.

However, once this ‘developing conflict’ has emerged in the character’s external world there is a tendency for it to spread conflict into other areas of the character’s life (see Figure # 6). Even though there is often one particularly urgent conflict that emerges early in the story, it is as if the developing conflict, once it is set in motion, creates a domino effect so that conflicts begin to emerge from every aspect of their life.



For example, in *Adaptation*, Charlie’s inability to write the screenplay brings him into conflict with his brother, his boss, his would-be girlfriend, the author of the book he is adapting, her lover, and (hilariously) Robert McKee, as well as what he sees as the ‘artless’ industry he finds himself working in. In *Insomnia*, Dormer’s reluctance to come clean about tampering with evidence brings him into conflict with his partner, his

partner's wife, the small town police officers, Internal Affairs, the killer, the victim's boyfriend and best friend, as well as the values of the police force that hails him as one of their best. In *The Others*, the ghostly occurrences bring Grace into conflict with her daughter, son, servants, and her husband about the cause of the haunting as well as challenge Grace's strong religious beliefs.

These extra levels of conflict often form the basis of sub-stories or plots that emerge alongside the central developing conflict. For example, in *The Curlies*, Andrew's reluctance to make a living playing music sets up a range of sub-stories involving conflicts with other parts of his life: the new leisure interests of his band mates, Tim's commitment to fatherhood, Andrew's professional and romantic clashes with Julie, his growing fondness for Jimmy, the unresolved relationship with his parents, as well as his ambivalence about Australia 'growing up' and becoming a republic. Sub-stories are common to feature length films, which often require a variety of stories and developing conflicts to sustain audience interest. They also provide the opportunity to develop fully the thematic shape of the film's narrative as each sub-story conflict explores a different angle of the central themes.

These sub-story conflicts (overlaying the central developing conflict) do not necessarily lead to the character being overcome with troubles scene after scene, sequence after sequence. Mainstream screenplays are driven by the central character's response to conflict. Sometimes their response will reduce the conflict. Other times it will increase it dramatically. This dynamic variation—between the relative wins and losses of the character—is a strategy employed to avoid the story becoming flat and monotone. For example, in *Adaptation*, Charlie rejoices when he thinks the answer to his writers' block is writing himself into the screenplay—only to despair in the very next scene when he realises how pretentious and self-indulgent he is being. In *The Truman Show*, Truman devises a way to drive over the bridge (a significant fear) in order to escape, only to be stopped on the other side by an even bigger problem—an apparent nuclear accident. Conversely, in *The Curlies*, Andrew is forced to babysit Jimmy only to discover to his delight that Julie, much younger and with very different hair, was once in a rock band that he admired—indeed he had a teenage crush on Julie.

Despite these various turns of fortunes, however, the general level of conflict should increase for the protagonist—'one step forward, two steps back'. As McKee argues, mainstream screenplays rely on the conflict continuing to develop through the

story so that the character is always confronting bigger and bigger obstacles to the resolution of their problem:

A story must not retreat to actions of lesser quality or magnitude, but move progressively forward to a final action beyond which the audience cannot imagine another (210).

To summarise, the second act of the character-centred model is called ‘Challenges’ and focuses on the main character’s attempts to overcome the developing conflict in their life. It can be summarised in this way: **The character faces numerous challenges, with varying results, in order to overcome the developing conflict.**

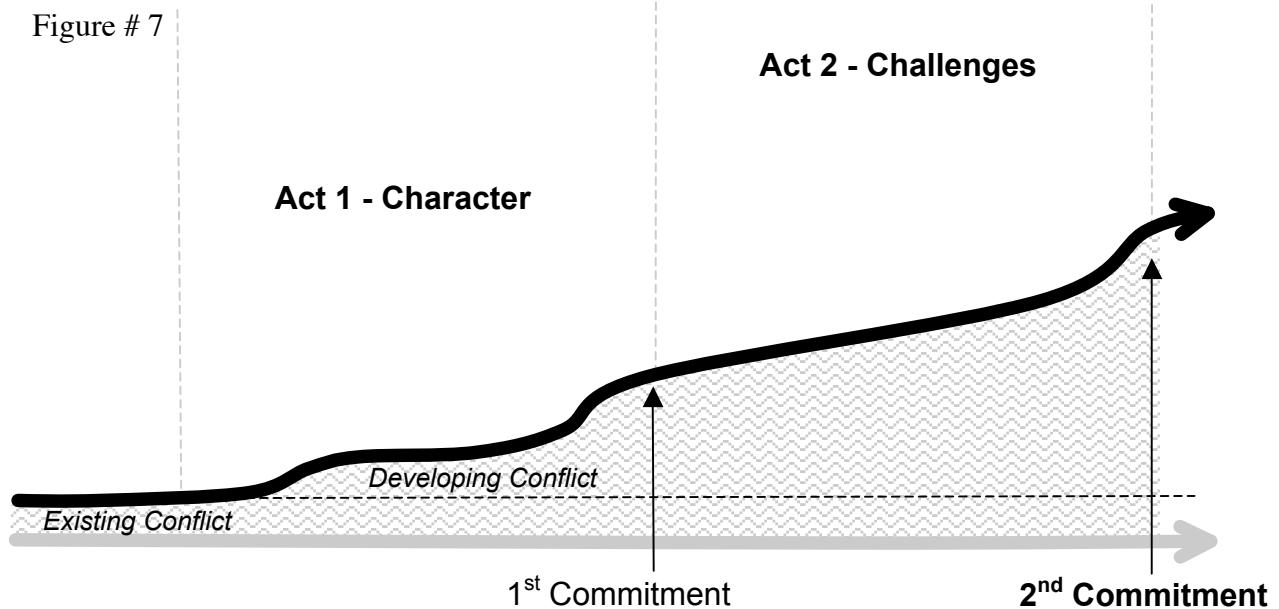
The external circumstances of the character continue to shift. This results in greater and greater conflict for the character. The conflict may begin to spread into other aspects of the character’s life as a result. Sometimes they will make progress towards a resolution of the conflict but in general it will continue to develop.

‘The Commitment at the End of Challenges’

At the end of the second act of ‘Challenges’, like at the conclusion of ‘Character’, the main character will once again make a commitment to a strategy to overcome the conflict (see Figure # 7). As we have seen, despite setting a goal previously, and experiencing a few wins along the way, the situation has only got worse. The challenges they have either won or lost have not reduced the conflict. Generally, as in the first act, a shift in their external circumstances makes the character aware of another approach to the problem. For example, in *The Others*, Grace becomes convinced the intruders are ‘not human’ when the door and piano open of their own accord and, therefore, adopts a new strategy and sets out to get a priest from the village. In *Insomnia*, Dormer must abandon his plans to frame Finch when the killer reveals he has secretly tape-recorded their conversations. Dormer’s new goal is to try and save the murder victim’s boyfriend—who Finch is hoping to make the ‘patsy’. In *The Truman Show*, Truman, after attempting to escape, is reassured by his best friend and is reunited with his father. Truman, seemingly, commits to staying in Sea Haven, despite secretly planning to escape again. In *The Curlies*, Andrew assures everyone that the ‘Rock the Republic’ concert will be the last for his punk band and after that he will commit to the children’s band. As these examples demonstrate, the new goal

sets the character off in a new direction, in an attempt to overcome the developing conflict. In all of these examples the main character makes a *commitment* to a specific goal they hope will reduce the conflict. This provides the transition into the next act.

Figure # 7



'Crisis'

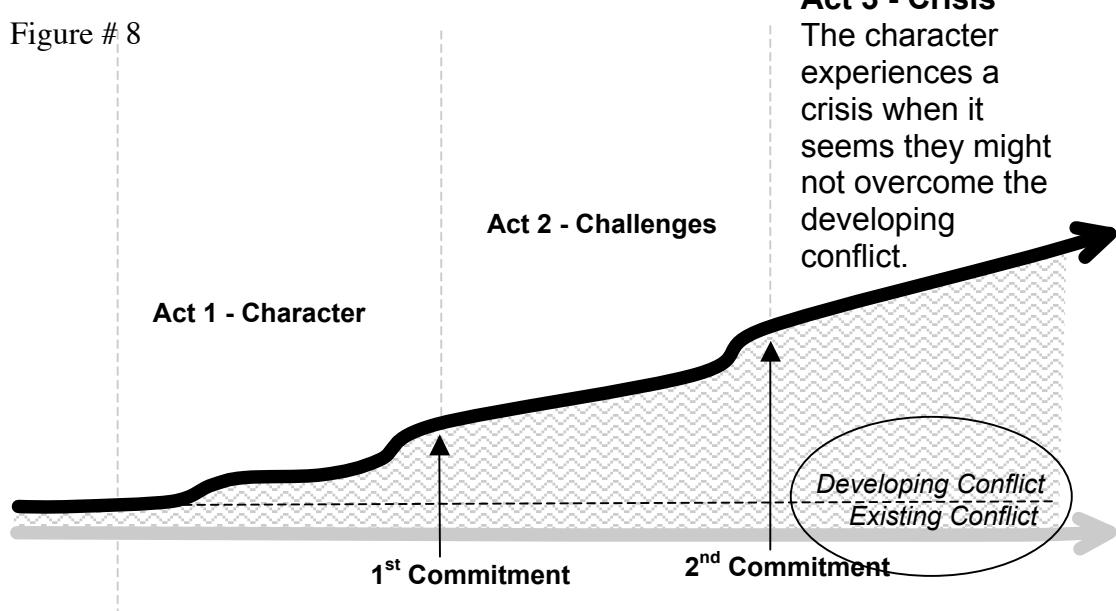
The third act of the character-based model is called 'Crisis' and focuses on the character coming to an apparent dead end in their attempt to overcome the conflict. It can be summarised as: **The character experiences a crisis when it appears they might not overcome the developing conflict.**

As we have seen, in the first two acts 'Character' and 'Challenges', the character has attempted a variety of strategies to try and overcome the conflict. What the character finds is, despite a few wins along the way, the problem does not go away. The conflict just gets worse. The world around them has changed so much, creating so much conflict, that the old ways of doing things no longer seem to work. They are at a 'crisis' where the way forward, to overcoming the developing conflict in their life, is no longer clear. For Charlie, in *Adaptation*—despite writing himself into the story, attempting to meet the writer whose book he is adapting as well as reluctantly going to a workshop by Robert McKee—he still cannot write the screenplay. In *Insomnia*, Dormer hits a dead end when, after his foiled attempts to plant evidence on

Finch and the arrest of the murder victim's innocent boyfriend, he realises he will not achieve justice unless he confesses to his improper investigations and destroys his reputation. In *The Curries*, Andrew comes to realise that his reckless actions at the 'Rock the Republic' concert have destroyed any hope of getting his punk band back together and ruined a great opportunity for his friends. Furthermore, he has probably lost his best friend in the process. The character's progress toward a resolution of the conflict grinds to halt throughout this act. This is the character's lowest point. This apparent collapse of the character's progress, forces the protagonist into a moment of introspection as they examine why they have failed. What they come to realise is what the audience probably knew all along: despite their 'external circumstances' shifting dramatically over the course of the story, the protagonist's 'internal characteristics' have barely moved at all. By and large, despite learning a few new skills, meeting new allies and taking a few new risks, they still cling fast to the same old values, beliefs, hopes and fears that they did at the beginning. As a result they still have the same 'existing conflicts' (See Figure # 8).

For many protagonists this is the stage where they acknowledge these existing conflicts so they can more fully prepare to confront the new and developing conflict.

Figure # 8



In other words, unable to manage the external world, the character needs to change 'internally' to reduce the conflict in his/her life. For example, Truman realises he must overcome his internal fear of open water if he is going to escape Sea Haven. Truman's suspicion that his father is a part of the apparent conspiracy around him,

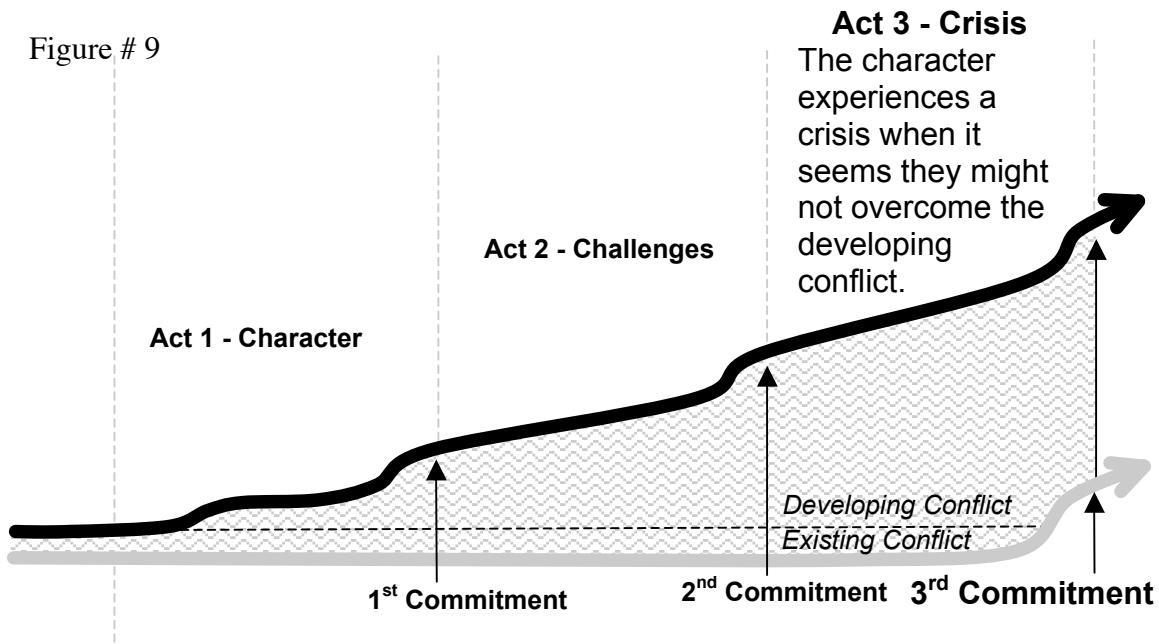
presumably, helps heal this ‘existing conflict’. In *Insomnia*, Dormer’s questionable methods of investigation are what put him in conflict with internal affairs in the first place. In order to conclude solve the case satisfactorily, Dormer realises he must re-evaluate his problematic internal beliefs about justice. In *Adaptation*, when Robert McKee tells Charlie that his characters must ‘change’, Charlie realises the reason he cannot write is because his own life is stagnant and unfulfilled, a fact that has been clear to the audience since the beginning of the film. In *The Others*, after Grace confesses to Charles about the day she went ‘mad’, she tells him she always felt he went to war to get away from her. This eventual recognition by the protagonist of an ‘existing conflict’ that has hampered their progress is an extremely common feature in mainstream screenplays.

To summarise the third act of ‘Conflict’ is focussed on the character recognising that there are very few opportunities left to overcome the developing conflict. **The character experiences a crisis when it appears they might not overcome the developing conflict.** This crisis forces the character to reflect on why they have failed. It is usually the case that they will recognise an inability to overcome an ‘existing conflict’ has impeded their progress.

‘The Commitment at the End of Crisis’

At the end of the third act of ‘Crisis’, the character will once again make a commitment towards a strategy to overcome the conflict. However, the commitment that occurs at the end of this act is slightly different to those made during others stages. The reason for this is that it will often feature a radical shift in the character’s approach to the problem. As we have seen, at the end of ‘Crisis’, the character is at a loss and, for much of the act, cannot see their way forward. It is only on acknowledging an ‘existing conflict’, and the ‘internal characteristics’ that have prevented them overcoming it, that the character can see a new way forward. It will usually involve the character making a significant internal ‘change’ in order to overcome a long suffered existing conflict. In other words, the character must be prepared to ‘change’ the beliefs, values or fears that have stalled their progress. Whatever new goal or strategy they commit to at this point will probably be an attempt to do just that (see Figure # 9).

Figure # 9



As with earlier commitments, this new goal may be motivated by a significant shift in their ‘external circumstances’—which in this instance helps the character make a commitment. For example, in *The Others*, once Grace is reconciled to her fear of abandonment by Charles, she is better equipped to deal with the ‘intruders’ in the house. When she wakes to find Charles gone, she also finds the curtains have been taken down, exposing her light-sensitive children to danger and signalling a new level of antagonism from the intruders. In *Adaptation*, Charlie commits to seeking help from his brother Donald to finish the script when Robert McKee (who Donald suggested Charlie go and see) highlights a flaw in not only his script, but his whole life. In *The Curlies*, Andrew, after being rejected by Tim and Julie, recognises his irresponsible behaviour and moves out of the squat he has set up at his parent’s old house. As he washes his clothes for the first time in months he rediscovers the recording industry contact. He calls them and, to his surprise, they want a meeting about the band, which he commits to.

One of the other differences, however, with the commitment made at the end of the ‘Crisis’ is that it does not necessarily have to be motivated by a significant shift in external events. Because of the deeply introspective nature of the ‘Crisis’, the character may become self-motivated in the setting of their goal. For example, in *Insomnia*, Dormer covertly discusses his situation with the hotel manager. She tells him it all comes down to what he is willing to live with. The next morning Dormer

picks up his badge and, with the inevitable risk of destroying his professional reputation, commits to arresting Finch. Similarly, in *The Truman Show*, Truman, despite pretending to return to his daily routine, finally commits to making his escape from Sea Haven via the open sea.

In summary, the commitment made at the end of the ‘Crisis’ will often see the character make a commitment to a new strategy to overcome the conflict. Part of this strategy will usually be a recognition that they will need to change ‘internally’ in order to overcome an existing conflict that has impeded their progress.

‘Change’

The final act of the character-based model is called ‘Change’ and focuses on the character’s potential to change in order to finally overcome the developing conflict. Indeed, I argue that: **The character’s potential to change determines the outcome of the conflict.** A common question that is asked of a screenplay is ‘does the central character have an arc?’ Various commentators have attempted to describe this concept:

This is a term used to describe the gradual stages of change in a character: the phases and turning points of growth (Vogler: 211).

In the best of films, at least one of the characters becomes transformed in the process of living out the story (Seger 1994: 186).

The finest writing not only reveals true character, but arcs or changes that inner nature, for better or for worse, over the course of the telling (McKee:104).

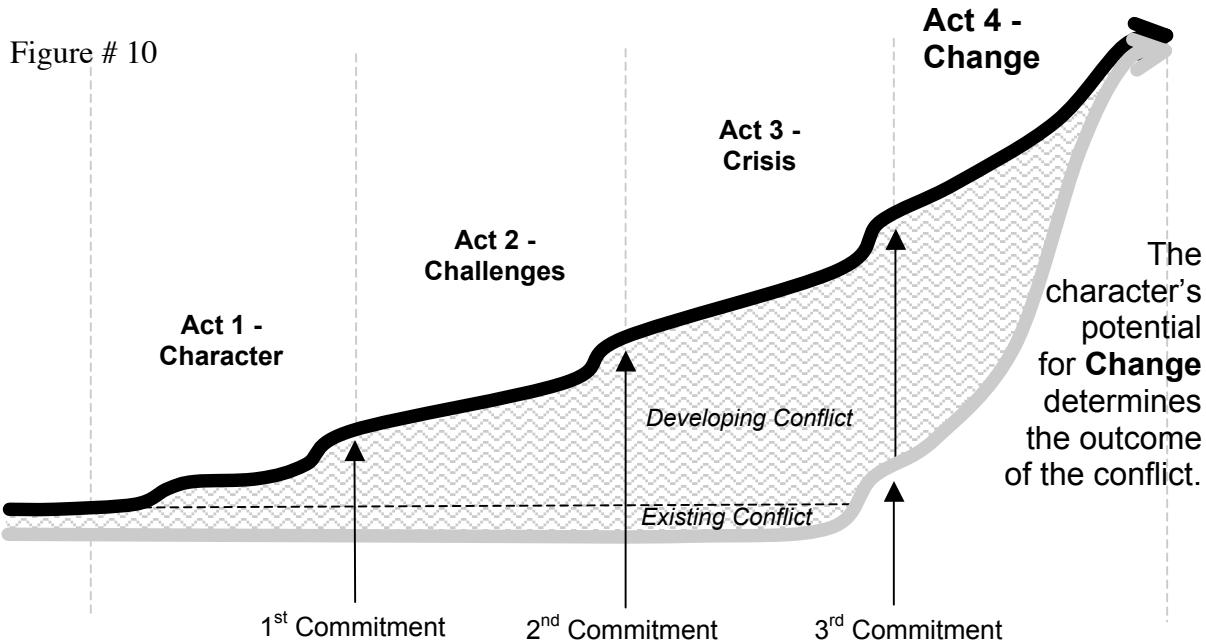
At its most basic, the ‘arc’ of a character refers to the amount of change their ‘internal characteristics’ and ‘external circumstances’ undergo as a result of the story. The last act of a mainstream screenplay is principally concerned with amount of change that the main character undergoes as a result of the conflict. As we have seen, there has been a great deal of change in the protagonist’s ‘external circumstances’ throughout the story. The focus in the last stage, however, is generally on the change that is displayed in their ‘internal characteristics’ and the final balance that is achieved with the world around them. The narrative question that is often implied by the

commitment at the end of the ‘Crisis’ is about whether or not they will be able to change ‘internally’ in order to overcome the conflict.

Another way to think about is if the central character were described at the beginning of the story using the variables of ‘internal characteristics’ and ‘external circumstances’, they would usually be described differently at the end of the story. For example, Charlie in the beginning of *Adaptation* is nervous around women and is unable to tell Amelia that he loves her. By the end, however, despite still being generally insecure, he is able to be honest with her (even to the point of a brief kiss) and is happier as a result. In *The Truman Show*, Truman overcomes his inertia in order to find Sylvia and explore the world outside Sea Haven. In *The Others*, Grace has not only overcome her fear of abandonment by her husband but has also had her strong religious beliefs overturned by the realisation that she and her children are actually ghosts. In *Insomnia*, Dormer regains his integrity by accepting his mistakes and preserving the evidence that will destroy his reputation but will achieve justice. In *The Curlies*, Andrew comes to appreciate the needs of those closest to him and finally makes a living as a musician. In all of these examples, as well as most mainstream films, the last stage of the narrative is focussed around the main character’s commitment to change and to overcoming their ‘internal’ flaws in order to finally confront the developing conflict. The narrative question that is implied by the stage of ‘Change’ is that the character’s *potential* to change will determine the outcome of the conflict. Will it be better, worse, both or completely unchanged?

The commitment to change, or otherwise, is not fully tested until the climax of the story. Until then the character can relent and, as a result, possibly change the outcome of the story. For example, Dormer in *Insomnia* is given the opportunity to destroy the evidence that would keep his reputation intact, but he forgoes it. Truman, after surviving a tremendous man-made storm, is given the opportunity by Christof to return to a life ‘without fear’ but refuses it. Charlie, in *Adaptation*, is presented with a familiar situation where he can tell Amelia how he feels about her and, for the first time, actually does. Andrew, in *The Curlies*, actively encourages Tim for the first time to take centre stage and sing at the audition. Grace, in *The Others*, after being confronted by the séance that confirms that she and the children are ghosts, admits that she doesn’t know where limbo is, thus confirming her acceptance that her previously strict religious beliefs may not be correct. In all examples, the main character’s commitment to an internal change is confirmed by the final stage of the

story. This change, or otherwise, confirms the outcome of the conflict and whether or not the main character has overcome this conflict and their challenges (see Figure # 10).



In summary, the final act of the character-based model is called ‘Change’ and focuses on the character’s potential to change in order to finally overcome the developing conflict. It is based on the idea that: **The character’s potential for change determines the outcome of the conflict.** And this potential for change will be confirmed in the final climactic stages of the story.

Conclusion and Further Analysis of *The Curlies*

As we have seen, the character-centred approach is an attempt to develop a model of screenwriting that integrates the structural function of each act with the defining features of the main character—using transparent terminology. The approach draws on the observations of some of the most popular screenwriting commentators of the last twenty-five years, as well as the critiques Thompson has made of these approaches. To summarise, I will outline the principle concepts of character-centred model using my original screenplay *The Curlies* as an example.

The character centred model defines the main ‘**Character**’ according to two variables. These are:

- **Internal Characteristics** (the character's internal beliefs, hopes, fears, desires, philosophies, memories, etc.)
- **External Circumstances** (the character's external physical traits, family relationships, social relationships, natural environment, etc.)

The ‘internal characteristics’ of Andrew, the main character in *The Curlies*, feature a strong rebellious streak, a desire to be the centre of attention, as well an aversion to change and responsibility. Andrew’s main ‘external characteristics’ feature an overly protective mother, a dismissive father, questionable talents as a singer, limited job prospects, and a group of more mature friends who are beginning to tire of Andrew’s antics.

The model defines ‘**Conflict**’ as the tension between the character’s ‘internal characteristics’ and ‘external circumstances’. It delineates between two types of conflict, which are:

- **Existing Conflict** (the pre-existing conflict in the character’s life at the beginning of the narrative)
- **Developing Conflict** (a new and growing conflict that emerges in the character’s external circumstances at the beginning of the narrative and continues until the end of the narrative).

Andrew’s ‘existing conflict’ is that his casual and irreverent approach to life has lead to a situation where, at almost thirty, he has few job prospects, a delicate relationship with his parents, particularly his father, loyal but increasingly distant friends, and little hope of playing music for a living as he had always dreamed. Andrew’s ‘developing conflict’ emerges when Tim, his best friend, has to quit the band in order to earn a living to support his pregnant girlfriend. This development sees Andrew and his friends form a children’s band, which causes an enormous amount of conflict for Andrew dreams of being a rock singer. The success of the children’s band, as well as Andrew’s continued relationship with Tim, is in question until the very end of the story.

The character-centred model also provides a narrative focus for each of the four acts that form the structure of the story. The narrative focus of each act is related to the character’s progress through the story. The four acts are:

- **Act 1 – Character** (A character's life is disrupted by a developing conflict)
- **Act 2 – Challenges** (The character faces numerous challenges, with varying results, in order to overcome the developing conflict)
- **Act 3 – Crisis** (The character experiences a crisis when it appears they might not overcome the developing conflict)
- **Act 4 – Change** (The character's potential for change determines the outcome of the conflict)

The Curlies can be summarised using the above definitions as a template:

- **Act 1 – Character** (When Andrew's best friend Tim has to consider quitting their infamous punk band, *The Pubes*, to support his pregnant girlfriend, the old friends hit on an idea to earn money playing as a children's band called *The Curlies*).
- **Act 2 – Challenges** (Despite finding an experienced and attractive female manager, playing to screaming three-year-olds is not the rock and roll lifestyle Andrew was hoping for as he approaches his thirtieth birthday and he does everything in his power to sabotage the group).
- **Act 3 – Crisis** (When Andrew's irresponsible actions get the band arrested during a concert Tim quits, taking up a dull job in a shopping centre, and *The Curlies* break up, forcing Andrew to reflect on the deterioration of his friendship with Tim).
- **Act 4 – Change** (Fortunately, Andrew is presented with an opportunity to get *The Curlies* a recording contract and, with new found charm and responsibility, convinces Tim to rejoin for a risky audition that ultimately secures a successful future for the band).

Finally, the character-centred model divides each act of the structure with a significant shift in the protagonist's goal, called a '**Commitment**':

- **Commitment** (The character commits to a goal to overcome the conflict when the conflict develops significantly).

This ‘commitment’ is often motivated by an accompanying shift in the protagonist’s external circumstances. In *The Curlies* there are three significant changes to Andrew’s goals that each provide a transition into the next act.

- **Commitment #1 (end of Act 1)** – Andrew is forced to commit to trying the children’s band idea when Tim says he has to quit.
- **Commitment #2 (end of Act 2)** – Andrew commits to taking *The Curlies* seriously if the band will reform *The Pubes* for one last concert for his thirtieth birthday.
- **Commitment #3 (end of Act 3 under a Four-Act scheme)** – Andrew commits to trying to get *The Curlies* back together after finding the old business card for the record company in some old washing.

As demonstrated the character-based model, using the above terminology, is able to accurately describe the structure of *The Curlies* as well as a range of mainstream films from varying genres. This analysis, of course, is a tentative starting point for the application of the character-centred model. There are a variety of screenplay structures that are yet to be explored using the model including screenplays that feature dual, parallel and multiple protagonists, protagonists that do not display an ‘arc’, stories that feature unresolved conflict, as well as episodic and non-linear narratives. Another area of further research would involve testing the model with a range of films of varying lengths to fully explore the ways in which act structure and frequency may vary. The model does, however, place character to the centre, hopefully providing the screenwriter with a set of concepts that effectively synthesise structure with character.

The usefulness of a model in communicating story ideas and concepts to screenwriting students, practitioners and associated professionals must also be a fair test of it. The accessibility and relevance of the model could be tested in a variety of ways in order to indicate potential strengths and weaknesses. While I have found, and demonstrated, the model to be a useful method of writing my own screenplay, as well as analysing a range of widely appreciated films, the model can only claim to be another, in an increasing long line of attempts, to understand the mysterious process of screenwriting.

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